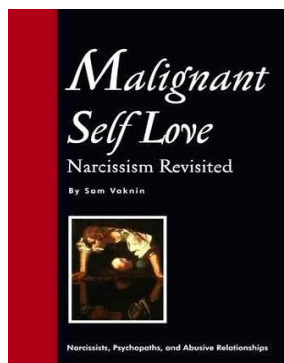


Macedonia's Public Intellectual

Interview with Ljubomir Danailov Frckoski

By: [Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.](#)



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Skopje, June 2008

Ljubomir Danailov Frcksoki ("Frcko" to his friends) is by far Macedonia's most prominent public intellectual. The author of this struggling nation's first constitution in 1991, he also contributed to the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which, in the wake of an armed insurgency, has defined, ten years later, the relationship between the country's majority and its restive Albanian minority. He served as Macedonia's Minister of Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs until 1997.

He is a Professor of International Law and Human Rights at the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Skopje and teaches in Trieste and Rome. A prolific

author of books and columns on actual topics, he often provokes the ire of the recipients of his wit and erudition. Inevitably in the Balkans, he is the butt of numerous conspiracy theories, some more sinister and improbable than others.

Face to face, Frckoski has an unruly mane of wavy thick hair, two piercing aquamarine eyes, and a disarming, impish smile. But these cannot hide his impatience with ignorance and dim-wittedness.

When we sat down for this interview, he had just returned from lecturing in Athens, the capital city of Greece, a country perceived by many Macedonians to be a bitter enemy. It was the first time ever that a Macedonian professor was invited to provide a regular lecture to an audience that also included rabid right-wingers. "They merely stood at the back of the amphitheater" - he grins - "and listened. I am not sure why...". His host told him: "We are making history here!".

Perhaps it had something to do with his considerable rhetorical skills. Though invariably animated, his arguments are coherent and well-structured. "What does it mean to be a Macedonian?" - I ask him - "What is the essence of your nationhood?"

"We are going through a process that other nations have traversed in the past: trawling history to construct our identity. Whatever being Macedonian means, we cannot be anything but. Sure, for asserting our uniqueness, we are likely to be clubbed on the head by the Serbs, Bulgarians, and the Greeks. It is dangerous to have big nations as one's neighbors. It is even more perilous than having to cope with cultural-ethnic minorities.

We are a nation of 1.7 million, with our own language and historical heritage. We need to digest all this using two constructions: horizontal (the debate among Macedonians to what extent we are Slavs or ancient Macedonians) and vertical (the ethnically non-homogeneous nature of our modern state). We need time to devise our polity, it is an on-going project and we deserve not to be pushed around and urged along, even if it unnerves our neighbors.

The red line is that it is impossible for us not to be Macedonians. History here is thick on the ground: the relics of ancient, Byzantine, Slav and even Ottoman-Muslim cultures. We earned our state with our blood. We liberated our territory by ourselves. This gives us self-confidence. Our evolution as a state was based on legal acts, on the fight against Fascism, and it was gradual: from the People's Republic of Macedonia to the Federal, and then the Socialist Republics and, currently, simply The Republic of Macedonia.

Moreover, we seceded from the federated Yugoslavia without bloodshed. At the time, we had a competent political elite, but we were also lucky in that Serbia was

looking to salvage substantial Serb minorities to its west, rather than the lesser number of Serbs to its south.

Thus, we embarked on a classic route of nation-building: we had a referendum, drafted a Declaration of Independence, enacted a Constitution. But, it was all done top-down, there was no grassroots movement. The people were traumatized by the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the transition from socialism to capitalism and democracy.

Will these achievements survive? Will the popular energy, so evident now, take a positive or a negative turn? How to channel this zest into the political process, not through the street? Above all, how to recognize that national homogeneity is not an option in this country. When we wrote the Constitution (in 1991), we made it a civic document and relegated the inevitable nationalist sentiment into the preamble. We couldn't ignore the upswell of emotions but we kept it out of the articles of the document, the parts that guide the working of the courts."

"So, the Macedonian identity is merely a defensive posture?"

"We were placed in this position by everyone around us with their numerical and economic superiority. Had we not had to confront this external opposition, we would have likely produced a cultural brand, not a military or an economic one. We, the Macedonians, have survived through our culture and in our cultural space, often unaware of it."

"You mentioned the fight against the occupiers in World War II. But did you fight the Nazis as Macedonians or as Communists?"

"The Liberation Movement had national and communist strands. After the territory was freed, the nationalists were persecuted or, like Kiro Gligorov, our first president, transferred to Belgrade, to be closely monitored. The Macedonian national movement was always in coalition with the ethnic minorities here. We inherited our multi-cultural tolerant pluralism from the Ottomans. This was the basis for our inclusive constitution that prevented the strife that characterized all the other republics that succeeded Yugoslavia.

True, nowadays, Macedonians distance themselves from the Albanians, but there is no active prejudice, no political mobilization to discriminate against the minorities and, thus, bring about conflict. What I call the Macedonian 'momentum of silence' survives in the gap between active and passive prejudice: no acceptance, but tolerance and toleration. That's why all these early warning reports fail. The Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs is now making the same mistake by boasting that it has saved Europe from embracing an unstable country."

I ask: "Not entirely stable. The Albanians took up arms in 2001 and forced Macedonia's leaders to sign the Ohrid Framework Agreement ..."

"I welcome the changes that we introduced to the constitution in 2001, they had real-life legal consequences. It was a new inclusive beginning, mediated by the foreign powers. Had we not faced an insurrection, we would still have been forced to implement the very same changes by the European Union, on the way to accession.

The Agreement is decried by some Macedonians because they are enamored with language and its power. This is the result of fear, not reason. Language reform (granting minorities the right to use their languages in some circumstances and settings - SV) is not the first step towards federalization. The foreigners are right in this respect. Albanian hasn't become a second official language. It can be used only in very particular cases.

Of course, some constructive ambiguity here saved the day. The Albanians were told that the right to use their language was a major accomplishment, the Macedonians were soothed with the promise that Albanian can and will be employed solely in a restricted fashion. The language of the articles in the Ohrid Agreement is clear-cut, the interpretation helpfully ambiguous and allows everyone to save face and declare 'victory'.

"The Ohrid Agreement, I am told by foreigners, is the only state-reaffirming, functional compact ever signed in the Balkans. All other agreements dealt with post-traumatic outcomes of state dissolution and the ensuing confusion. It is short, but has disproportional symbolic significance. And don't forget that we did not negotiate directly with the insurgents. The USA and the EU guaranteed the equal-handed implementation of any understanding we reached and this was good enough for everyone concerned."

I interject: "Then why has the same formula failed to work in the case of the name negotiations with Greece that have been going nowhere for 17 years with US mediation? In NATO's March 2008 Bucharest Summit, Macedonia was not invited to join the alliance because it would not succumb to Greek intransigence: Greece insisted that Macedonia should change its constitutional name to cater to Greek domestic political sensitivities..."

Frckoski: "Macedonia is actually not negotiating with Greece. They don't treat us as partners. It was the same with the Ohrid Agreement: we had dealings with the Americans and that provided the insurgents with the legitimacy to reach a compromise ("If the Americans say it's OK, then we can safely go for it!"). We needed the mediators to allow the Albanians to strike a deal without being lynched by their own extremists.

And, you know what? This Agreement will survive because of the guarantees embedded in it. We have no alternative. The current debate between Macedonians and Albanians is about interpretation, within the framework of the text, with a view to legal instruments of the EU regarding minorities, cultural identities, and human rights. The Badinter principle has not been abused even once! (A principle in the agreement that requires dual majorities - of the entire parliaments and of the Albanian MPs to pass laws pertaining to inter-ethnic issues - SV).

Previous SDSM (socialist) governments made two breaches in this protective wall, though. They allowed the issuance of bilingual passports, thus expanding the role of the Albanian language beyond the original scope; and they accredited Tetovo university, a chaotic institution that openly defied the law.

As for the Greeks, should they succeed in their quest to ostracize us and deny our identity, all the others will climb on the bandwagon: the Bulgarians, the Serbs. I see no problem for us to adopt a composite name such as the New Republic of Macedonia, Upper Macedonia, and so on. But, we cannot give up the non-exclusive use of the adjective and title 'Macedonian'. We may discuss what it denotes: its cultural, linguistic, and historical connotations. What we cannot and will not discuss is giving it up all together. This is the red line. Regrettably, the Greeks themselves have been changing their positions and demands dizzyingly." - he sighs.

On to the greater world. I suggest that Macedonia may have a Russian option or card to play.

Frckoski dismisses this scenario off-hand: "It is good that the Americans have shifted their intelligence base from Athens to Skopje. This move may antagonize Greece and Serbia, where the Russian presence is increasing. Even Bulgaria may be reverting to its Russophile roots. But, Macedonia must serve as the 'soft border' between east and west. Macedonians should overcome their instinctive and misguided feelings about Russian 'brotherhood' and adhere to the national interests of Macedonia.

Russia was always against an independent Macedonian state: an unstable entity, in their view, that may jeopardize Russian interests, policies, and presence throughout the region. Moreover, Russia represents an attempt to link ethnic homogeneity to Christian Orthodoxy which, if imported to Macedonia, will surely lead to the dreaded federalization. The new government can't say, as they currently do: 'who cares about the Albanians?' We must co-exist with the Albanians. It took us years to sever the umbilical cord to Serbia's 'Commonwealth' of states. The Serbs never forgave Gligorov for his role in this historic separation. Enough said."

In 1995, an assassination attempt was made on President Kiro Gligorov's life. His face was disfigured, but his stature among Macedonians grew as a result.

"If you alone, of all your neighbors, serve as a forward base of the USA, you may find yourself as isolated as Israel is in the Middle East." - I venture.

"Isolation is our history." - Frckoski reacts gloomily - "Macedonia has always been its neighbors' nightmare. If our multiculturalism succeeds, the decline of their ethnically homogeneous model of statehood will hasten. We threaten their very foundations. This is a semiotic clash between meanings, symbols, identities, language, approaches. Once we understand this, we will develop a cohesive national consensus."

Another subject: the ruling coalition, led by Nikola Gruevski and the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE party, has just won the elections with a landslide.

"This is a counter-reformation, a reaction against the former political elites. It comes replete with its own ersatz intelligentsia and quasi-populist new upper crust. These are the consequences of democracy, the people feel that they are being liberated from the shackles of the old ruling club. There is a real love affair between the leader and the led, a romantic mood that excludes political parties.

But, this is a delusion. The ruling party and Gruevski do not have the leeway to act as they see fit. Macedonia is set on the path for Euro-Atlantic integration. Macedonia's options are limited and well-delineated. In their attempt to pretend otherwise, the coalition conduct is rendered erratic and political continuity is undermined. They are watching the wrong silent film in the wrong cinema hall.

Unfortunately, the opposition lacks the kind of high-caliber cadre needed to tackle issues of economic reform and development. When they were in power, this lacuna undid them. They are syndicalists, a status quo, pro-oligarchs party. They are conservative traditionalists in the worst sense of the word. They, too, are anti-intellectuals.

Still, I do not accept that there is a real risk of authoritarianism here. Macedonia is a small and open society with a massive involvement of the international community. This is positive. Macedonia is not monolithic. Mob-rule (ochlocracy) is impossible: there are simply too many mobs to choose from! A dictatorship will require ethnically unacceptable steps. In a way, the very existence of Macedonia's minorities guarantees its openness as a society and some 'ventilation', fresh air."

"In which sense is Macedonia European, therefore?" - I enquire

"European civilization developed in the Mediterranean. Yet, civilization is not only about cultural heritage. It is also about organization: prioritizing and implementing plans. Here we are sorely lacking. Consider, for instance, Euro-Atlantic integration. This is the utmost formal priority of Macedonia. Yet, in the real-life political scene, everything seems to defeat this purpose: Macedonia's new-found

populism, for example, is anti-European. Even our multiculturalism is not a strictly European attribute."

"There are sizable populations of immigrants throughout Europe ..." - I point out.

"Europe has a schizophrenic, multiple personality attitude towards multiculturalism. It is practiced among countries, but rarely inside nation-states. The oft-touted examples, Switzerland and Belgium, are actually federations. Europe's development will resemble ours: functional integration, no discrimination against minorities in the labor market, in housing, and in the use of languages. But, there will be no real acceptance, assimilation, and the production of a joint culture. The current failed policy of integration will be replaced with a policy of differences with multiple parallel legal systems: one for the majority, others for the minorities. The emergent cultural racism sits well with the rise of right-wing parties. It is a period of experimentation, using actual policy measures, rather than concepts and theories.

Macedonia can lead the way. If we, poor and under-developed as we are, succeed, so can they. We are accustomed to freedom of speech and religious issues. Cultural sensitivity is in-built, we are educated this way from early childhood. Hate speech is rare.

This is why Americans understand Macedonia far better than Europeans do. We lack the resources to realize a 'Macedonian Dream' akin to the 'American Dream'. But, we are still very similar.

The problem is that the current government regards Macedonia's multi-ethnic composition as a curse, not an opportunity. They don't understand their own country. They shake the bridges between the communities that we have so laboriously built and they reject 'soft arbitration' by foreigners."

"Soft arbitration?"

"Look, the Albanians don't trust us. We can't agree anything with them directly. In 1994, we proposed a national ID card with the names of Albanian citizens printed using the Albanian, Latin, alphabet. The Albanians demanded that all the script in the ID Card be Latin, rather than Cyrillic. We referred the matter to the Americans and one week later, the Albanians accepted our offer, unchanged. Gruevski doesn't understand the role of foreigners here.

We should use this type of 'soft arbitration' to resolve the issue of merit-based, non-politicized recruitment to the civil service. My suggestion: involve foreigners in the selection and vetting of candidates for jobs in the administration."

"Is this not compromising your sovereignty?" - I ask.

For the first time, Frckoski loses his composure:

"To me, sovereignty is meritocracy! Sovereignty is when bureaucrats are loyal to the state, not to their political masters! What do I care how I achieve this goal? The means are not important - the end is! I am interested in results!"

He leans back and eyes me intensely, almost pleadingly:

"Correct and efficient procedures are the only consensus in a multicultural society. And the only guarantee that the state will function as it should is a Webberian bureaucracy. This is the exclusive glue uniting the ethnicities of a country like Macedonia. This is why corruption and dysfunction are more dangerous here than in Slovenia, which is largely ethnically homogeneous. Making this happen should be our first priority!"

"The civil service? Not NATO accession?"

"Accession to NATO is crucial for countries like Macedonia, the successors to much larger polities, now saddled with new minorities, created overnight by the disintegration of the previous structures. Security is an issue far more important than human rights or democracy. Joining NATO allows for peaceful demarcation of the international borders. There is a pervasive fear of the future here. People have been traumatized by a bad history. Granted, their fear is irrational and based on the manipulation of abstract symbols, but, it is still there and fosters the emergence of mass manipulators and authoritarian regimes.

NATO has changed. Now it regards internal unrest as a challenge. Minority rights are part of the accession process, one of the three pillars. In this sense, NATO is more efficient than the EU. This is precisely the main issue in Macedonia today. NATO membership means a predictable, controllable Albanian sector. This is why Greece's veto on Macedonia's accession to NATO is highly irresponsible.

Also, the American role in NATO is pronounced. The deeper NATO is entrenched here, the larger the role of the USA. EU accession, on the other hand, means only greater Greek involvement and penetration.

The negotiations for NATO accession were mishandled by the government, probably owing to an internal resistance and lack of motivation to compromise. They should have surveyed all the options and exposed the Greeks to the world as the intransigent party. We should have involved the Europeans and Americans in the process far more heavily."

Question: "Kosovo has declared independence in February 2008. Good or bad for Macedonia?"

Frckoski, unhesitatingly: "Kosovo is an opportunity for Macedonia. About 200 million euros of trade will be displaced from Serbia to western Macedonia. Skopje-Pristina is now the only reliable land link to Kosovo. Foreign companies are already sending scouts and establishing their headquarters here, to cover not only Kosovo and Macedonia, but also Albania, south Serbia, and, to some extent, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece. The Albanians of Macedonia stand to profit, but this has to be a state-organized affair, not like the smuggling operations of the 1990s, during the embargo. We have to recognize Kosovo, normalize our relations, and support the presence of the USA."

"Finally, a personal question: do you miss being in politics?"

"I am way over my head in various academic pursuits. I am a participant in all the major political debates. If anything, I would like to be less mired in politics, to be able to spend more time with my family, and to avoid the kind of personal attacks that cause my nearest and dearest anxiety.

But, you can't avoid your character and destiny. I am ideologically committed to what I do. There is no personal gain in this. I simply believe in freedom and can't resist the call to further and defend it. I try to shape my environment and find the kind of company that I would feel comfortable with. Don't we all?"

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